

Mermaid Body Found?

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Investigative Briefs



Has the body of an actual mermaid been discovered? Well, no, but that very idea was launched by an Animal Planet “documentary” that proved to be a crockumentary—in this case a fictional story offered in the realistic style of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).

In two airings (May 27 and July 15, 2012), *Mermaids: The Body Found* prompted viewers to search eagerly for additional information about the creature. There was, of course, none to be had, since the “body” was nonexistent.

However, I was once able to actually examine the body of an *absolutely real* faux mermaid. It was of the type popularized by showman P.T. Barnum in 1822, when he exhibited “the greatest curiosity in the world” known as the “Fejee Mermaid.” In time the public became wise and voiced its outrage, whereupon Barnum conceded it was “a questionable, dead mermaid.”

No doubt Barnum’s fake was very much like the one I was permitted to examine at the Nature Museum in Grafton, Vermont (see photo). As shown by modern analysis of such old taxidermied fakes (e.g., one at the Peabody Museum), the usual specimen was made from the hind part of a fish joined to a torso—not from a monkey as often stated, but molded from composition material. My examination revealed the Grafton mermaid to be so made, with hair glued on, teeth inserted, and claws affixed.

Whether described as “mermaids” or “mermen,” these “Fejee”-type merpeople are typically quite similar (as distinguished from another type, which is manufactured by making alterations to a devilfish and called a “Jenny Hanniver”). Indeed, the Grafton mermaid is remarkably similar to a “Merman of Aden,” pictured on a 1939 postcard when it was exhibited at a Ripley’s “Believe It Or Not!” odditorium in New York City. (For more, see my *Tracking the Man-Beasts*, 2011, chapter 21: “Merpeople.”)

No convincing mermaid or -man has ever washed up on shore. The idea is absurd—that a human could mate with a fish or vice-versa, to produce a half-human, half-fish hybrid. Such creatures exist only in our imagination, shaped by superstition. Like so many other man-beasts—Bigfoot, futuristic humanoids, werewolves—they are versions of ourselves.